

Foundation

The creation of a building reenacted the primordial Creation. Each building project was a repetition of the grandest construction project of all. In many old Creation myths, a divine being was sacrificed to make the cosmos. People began making sacrifices at foundations in order to reenact that original sacrifice...

—Tracy Kidder, *House*

“Hello again, Tom.”

Voldemort looked up at Ginny, clearly enraged. “*What did you say to me, girl?*”

“*Ginny!*” Harry hissed, wishing she hadn’t said anything. While it was true that Voldemort now looked exactly as Tom Riddle probably would have if he’d allowed himself to age naturally, Harry didn’t have any hope that the Mandrakes had removed any of Voldemort’s malice and cunning, let alone his original store of magical power, which was considerable. He actually thought longingly of the spell Voldemort had put on Draco Malfoy, removing his mouth so that he couldn’t speak. *Please, please keep quiet, Ginny...*

“Well,” she said, her voice shaking, “technically we haven’t met, but I met a version of you through your old diary. I do *feel* like I know you....*all* about you,” she added, her voice still shaking, although less. Harry frowned at her; was there something Riddle had revealed to her that she hadn’t told Harry? Or was she just bluffing? He couldn’t believe that Ginny was just *talking* to him as though he were a *normal* person. He knew she had nerve, but—

“*Crucio!*”

Suddenly, she was writhing on the ground, still bound hand and foot, an unearthly scream ripped from her lungs. There had been no warning whatsoever. Sweat was pouring down Harry’s brow as he struggled with his bonds, his heart in his throat as her screaming continued. All he could think was that he wished it was him instead of Ginny. He saw that Ron was also struggling with his bonds, more successfully than Harry. He’d broken them, and was merely holding his hands behind his back in a show of still being restrained. Harry shook his head at him.

“*Don’t try anything right now, Ron,*” he whispered, barely moving his lips. He could tell that Ron could hear him through Ginny’s agony. “*He’d kill you without a thought.*”

His first instinct was to refuse to show Voldemort that his torturing Ginny had an effect on him, but this would not only have been the most difficult thing he’d ever had to do, if he could accomplish it at all, he realized even as the sobs were punching their way out of him that even if he’d managed it, an impassive response might only make Voldemort strive even harder to get some reaction from him. Tears rolled down his face as he forced himself to stay focused on her. He wished she had learned the pain-blocking technique, but when they’d tried to do this in Dueling Club meetings, Neville, oddly enough, had been the only other student to accomplish the complete mind-body separation. Harry was starting to fear for her sanity when Riddle finally lifted his wand from her, breaking the link, and Harry wanted to go to his knees beside her and take her into his arms. She turned her head to look at Harry, her eyes wide and unseeing. *Oh, god, Ginny,* he thought; *please be all right...*

“*Harry,*” she whispered; he let out a relieved sigh, quite against his will. Next to him, Hermione sobbed and Ron gave a relieved sigh.

“*I’m here, Ginny,*” Harry said quietly to her, then looked up at Voldemort, his jaw set. However, he was distracted a moment later by seeing Draco Malfoy’s face as he stood next to his master and a little behind. The effect that the spell had had on *him* was also clear. For the first time, Harry took hope.

"Please," Harry said to Voldemort, "let the three of them go. I'll—I'll do whatever you want. You wanted me anyway, didn't you? That's why Ron was supposed to be brought here by the Portkey, right? To lure me here? You've got me already. I'm here. Now let the others go back."

The cold, high laugh was like a blade being run up Harry's spine, but it did sound marginally more human now that the madman had had the Mandrake sweets. "And why should I do that, exactly? Especially when I never expected to have the great pleasure of making you watch me—in person, that is—torture your friends before killing all of you. It is true that I thought the werewolf to be a particularly good choice....my servant here pointed out that he cannot escape by Apparating *and* that many, many things can be done to him without proving fatal. Far more *suffering* can take place when you needn't worry about the victim dying...." Harry glared at Draco Malfoy now, whose face had changed again, into a mask of pure hatred, directed at Harry, Ron and Hermione. "But where are my manners? I should be more generous to my loyal servants, should I not?" Riddle said, with a strange lilt to his voice. He turned to Malfoy, who was still missing his mouth. His eyes went wide, faced again with his master. However, with a wave of his hand, Riddle had returned his mouth to him.

He gasped, then said in a raspy whisper, "Thank you, M'Lord...."

Riddle waved his hand again, but this time he was brushing away the gratitude. "It's nothing. Time for me to show my gratitude to *you*, as my loyal servant," he said, suddenly grasping Malfoy's arm and pushing up his sleeve so he could press the tip of his wand to the Dark Mark on his left forearm. Malfoy immediately collapsed onto his knees, making use of his newly recovered mouth to cry out. Harry felt someone jostling his elbow and he glanced surreptitiously at Hermione; Ron was busily tugging at her bonds, freeing her as well, while Riddle was busy summoning his remaining followers. As soon as she was free, Hermione reached into her pocket for her wand and raised it, disappearing with a *pop!* that went unnoticed by Riddle, due to the noise Malfoy was still making.

"*She'll bring help*," Harry said softly to Ron, who nodded in response. He could have made quick work of Harry's bonds as well, but Riddle turned his head to look at them, his eyes widening when he saw that Hermione was gone. Harry hoped that, behind his back, Ron's hand was on his wand. He didn't know whether Ron was up to the task of dueling with Tom Riddle, but at least he *could* duel with him, Harry thought, as he didn't have a brother wand. On the other hand, he thought, if Ron took my wand from my pocket and he got it to link with Riddle's....

Harry found himself gazing longingly at Riddle's wand, still on the Dark Mark. Suddenly, he took the wand from Malfoy's arm and turned to face Harry and Ron, his features contorted in fury. Ginny still lay on the ground at their feet, her eyes wide, looking back and forth between Harry and Ron on the one hand, Tom Riddle on the other. Harry could see Riddle clutching his wand so tightly that his knuckles were turning white, and his eyes were practically popping out of his skull.

"If you think she can save you by bringing that old fool's supporters, you are far more stupid than I thought," he sneered. "My Death Eaters will be here *before* the girl will have the chance to bring help. After all, she can only Apparate as far as Hogsmeade," he said in a maddeningly logical voice. "One cannot Apparate to Hogwarts."

Harry groaned inwardly as he realized that Riddle was correct; it *would* take Hermione a while to bring reinforcements, even running back to the castle in her wolf form. In the meantime, Harry was starting to hear *pops!* all around him as Death Eaters appeared in the field and in the overgrown garden before the ruined cottage. He counted them mentally as they approached their master; only about two dozen left. Or only that many could Apparate to Godric's Hollow. It was more than had come to the graveyard in Little Hangleton, three years earlier, but Harry knew that there had been far more before Stonehenge. More than three times this many had escaped from Azkaban. Riddle saw his eyes moving over the Death Eaters and guessed what he was thinking.

"Yes, this is what you have left me," he spat bitterly. "My remaining *free* Death Eaters. However, just because many of my servants are not free, do not underestimate them. They shall feel the Dark Mark...they shall know that I am summoning them...it may take them longer to come to me, but come to me they shall, you mark my words. I *shall* rebuild. You may have taken my dragons and dementors, you may have eliminated Lucius Malfoy and Ludo Bagman—if you knew the things *he's* done for me!—but rebuild I shall. Remember—there are no longer dementors to keep prisoners of the Ministry in check, *and* I still have loyal servants who work for the Ministry....*Let* the stupid girl fetch help, much good it'll do you. I also have servants of which you know nothing," he added in a taunting voice. "Yes, my servants are here, and more shall come."

Harry didn't recognize most of the men and women approaching, the remaining Death Eaters, the ones who had still managed to avoid prison. They were looking at in each other in confusion, clearly wondering about the identity of this wizard with the salt-and-pepper hair. Riddle motioned for them to approach, which they did, hesitating. "Yes, it is I, your Master!" he confirmed in a ringing voice. "My appearance has changed, but your loyalty to me has not, I hope," he added, the

implied threat quite clear. Most of them looked less hesitant now, and Harry's eyes scanned the faces, looking for Cho, before he remembered that she was in Ministry custody. Would she come? he wondered. He tried to imagine all of the cells at the Ministry filled with agonized Death Eaters feeling their Marks burning. Would they escape on their own to come to their Master? Or would a traitor to the Ministry free them? And who were these other servants?

Then his heart leapt into his throat as he realized that Snape would have felt the pain from his Dark Mark being activated; he would know just where they were! All he needed to do was get off the Hogwarts grounds so that he could Apparate to Godric's Hollow. Harry looked around the circle of dark-robed figures surrounding them; that probably wouldn't help, one person, not when the three of them were hemmed in by two dozen Death Eaters, with more to come if Voldemort was correct about his imprisoned servants doing whatever they could to obey his summons. Harry was finding it difficult to continue to think of him as Voldemort, however. When he had lost his temper it was easier, but he looked so unlike the snake-faced monster and so much like the boy from the diary that Harry couldn't help calling him "Riddle" in his head.

And then Harry saw *him*. He gave a very small, almost imperceptible nod. Harry could tell that Riddle had not seen it; he was glaring at Harry, Ron and Ginny. Harry glanced again at Malfoy, who was gazing at Ginny with a look of anguish. Did their fates lie in the hands of these two? he wondered. Plus Hermione. And Snape. Would Dumbledore come? he wondered. He had come to Stonehenge. Surely Hermione would bring Dumbledore....but would it be soon enough?

He looked back at Riddle; it was so strange to see ordinary dark eyes in his face, rather than the red of his altered self. There was complete and utter silence as Riddle gazed back at Harry; every breath seemed to be suspended, waiting, waiting....

"The Warriors of Light shall come."

Riddle looked as though he had awoken from a long sleep, shaking himself. "Who said that?" he demanded. He had not seen Harry's lips move, nor anyone else's. Harry gasped. He had forgotten that Riddle would be able to understand everything Sandy said. Would Riddle know what it meant? he wondered.

"I demand to know who said that!" he screamed, his face turning red with rage.

"Said-said what, M-master?" stuttered a familiar voice. Harry resisted the urge to look at him. Despite the nod, Harry wondered whose side he was *really* on. Had he repented and returned to his Master's service? Was he here of his own volition or against his will?

"*Crucio!*" Riddle cried again, pointing his wand at the speaker, who collapsed onto the ground, howling in agony, making Harry remember what Ginny had just been through. He glanced down at her again, trying to tell her how much he loved her with his eyes alone.

After a few minutes that probably felt far longer to his victim, Riddle lifted his wand and ended the curse. Harry swallowed, looking at the prone, inert figure, wondering whether Riddle would work out who-or what-had spoken. Another thing about which Harry had never been very clear was whether Voldemort understood that snakes had the Sight. Did he think someone had said that about the Warriors of Light to taunt him? Did he not understand that it was a snake saying it, that it was a prediction?

And then Harry took a moment to think about what Sandy's prediction meant: Hermione was sending help! Or Snape, or Dumbledore. But help was on the way...they had only to survive until help arrived and then everything would be all right. He decided that grinning would be a very bad idea and did his best to hide his elation. *The Warriors of Light shall come*. Well, he thought, it can't be soon enough.

"Now, my Wormtail. Come here and put that silver hand of yours to good use on the werewolf, unless you would like more of the same."

Harry felt like he had stopped breathing. Ron's eyes flashed red and met Harry's. *Silver*.

"Y-yes, M-master," Pettigrew stuttered, staggering slowly to his feet and making his slow way toward Ron. He was walking with a stooped posture, making his short frame appear smaller still. Harry wondered what tortures Voldemort had visited upon *him* since he had been retrieved from Azkaban.

However, unlike Harry, Wormtail did not know that Ron was no longer bound. As soon as he was within reach of his intended victim, Ron pulled out his wand and pointed it at him. Immediately, three different Death Eaters pointed their wands at Ron in turn, crying out, "*Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!*"

Ron's scream was more like a wolf's howl than anything else and Harry sank to his knees, unable to stop the tears flowing down his cheeks as the three curses converged on his best friend. *Where are the sodding Aurors?* he thought. Ron's wand fell to the ground and Riddle summoned it casually, regarding Ron with a gleeful grin. Ginny's face showed her anguish as she gazed at her tormented brother, convulsing on the ground as the three crackling amber lights connected his

body to the wands of the three Death Eaters. Her face was red and blotchy from crying, and Harry could barely make out her saying, "*Ron, Ron we all love you...Ron, be strong...*"

With a nod from Riddle, the curses were lifted. Ron remained on the ground, his eyes wild and red; blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, perhaps from his biting his tongue. Harry, still on his knees, turned to Riddle. "Stop this!" he screamed. "Torture *me!* Kill *me!* But leave them alone!"

"Oh, but I *shall* kill you, Harry," he said very calmly, twirling Ron's wand between two fingers. "I shall kill you last of all. As for torture, what do you think that was? I've told you already—you get to see your best friends suffer....that is *your* torture. Well," he conceded, "only some of it. But how *would* you propose I torture someone who is unaffected by the Cruciatus Curse, hmm? How else but to torture the ones closest to you while you watch, knowing that it is your fault and your fault alone that they suffer...."

"*No!*" Harry cried, struggling to his feet. "It is *not* my fault—it's yours! Always yours! All of this suffering is because of *you*, not me! You can stop it at any time!"

Riddle smirked. "Or continue it. Well, you do actually have a point. There really *is* nothing you can do to stop me," he said casually. "I *meant* that your mere continued existence is the reason for their suffering. That and the *things* you have done that have—made me *unhappy*," he said, his voice going into a low growl. Looking straight at Ron, Riddle snapped Ron's wand in two and threw the pieces to the ground. "Think about that as Wormtail does his part now," he said to Harry, before turning to Peter Pettigrew. "Wormtail? Are you ready? As we discussed? Until I tell you to stop."

Peter Pettigrew drew his lips into a line and nodded, then knelt next to Ron, still lying on the ground. With a wave of his hand, Ron's arms and legs were attached to the ground so that he could not move. He struggled, to no avail; the bonds were magical this time. There was nothing physical against which he could fight.

Ron looked up at Pettigrew. "Remember," he rasped through cracked lips, "I was once your Master."

Pettigrew looked shaken by this; after a moment's pause, he ripped open Ron's cloak, robes and shirt, baring his chest. Harry's heart was beating very fast, wondering what he was going to do.

"*Aaaaaaaaoooooooooooooh!*" Ron cried, turning it into a howl, as Pettigrew pressed his silver hand against his skin, first here, then there; the smell of burning flesh was high in Harry's nose and there were six very distinct burns on Ron's chest, each in the shape of Peter Pettigrew's silver hand. Ron struggled against his invisible bonds, and Ginny finally managed to sit up, although her arms, like Harry's, were still bound to her sides.

"*Ron!*" she cried over and over, her eyes streaming, her hair sticking to her damp face. Harry had never felt so helpless and so awful. He couldn't transfigure into a golden griffin with his arms bound to his sides and he couldn't reach his wand to curse Pettigrew. He was utterly worthless and useless and it was all his fault that Ron and Ginny were suffering....

"Stop!" Riddle said to Pettigrew, who nodded and backed away from Ron, not meeting his victim's eyes. "So, werewolf, are we enjoying ourselves yet?" Riddle said smoothly, making Harry feel more murderous than when he'd been trying to kill the sixteen year old Riddle in the nearby woods.

Ron didn't answer but glared at Riddle defiantly. He opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly, soft *pops!* started sounding all around them and Harry thought his heart would explode with gratitude. *The Warriors of Light shall come.* Hermione had done it! Help had arrived far more quickly than he'd thought it would, too. People he recognized as Aurors—some of them rescued from Azkaban—were now ranged around the circle of Death Eaters and began the attack. Ron was grinning ear to ear, despite the fact that smoke was still rising from his burns.

"That's my girl," he said softly, smiling.

"But—how did she get Aurors here so quickly?" Harry said, shaking his head in wonder, as the Death Eaters in the circle around them were forced to turn about and give their attention to the Aurors. Immediately, the curses started flying. Harry looked but did not see Hermione among those who had appeared.

"She must have gone straight to the Ministry!" Ron said hoarsely. Harry had no doubt that he was correct; of *course* Hermione would think to do this. It was a good thing *she* was the one who'd gone for help and not him. "She's probably heading for the castle now, to get Dumbledore," Ron added.

Harry nodded, thinking hopefully of the headmaster. *He* could save them....But then he looked at Ginny, and at Draco Malfoy. If we need to be rescued, he thought, perhaps we're not the triangle who will conquer Voldemort....or perhaps this isn't when it will happen. He couldn't possibly see how the current situation could become Voldemort's downfall. The odds were still most definitely in his favor, even though the older wizard had returned to looking like an actual human being.

Riddle was whirling around, watching his Death Eaters battle the Aurors. The Death Eaters

doggedly kept their backs to the center of the circle, so that they formed a barrier between the Aurors and their Master, plus Harry, Ron, Ginny, Draco Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew.

"Do it again, Wormtail!" Riddle cried to Pettigrew, spit flying from his mouth. However, Peter Pettigrew turned, first this way and then that, watching the duels going on all around the perimeter of the circle, a look of wonder on his face. Harry thought he saw Katie at one point, but he hoped he was wrong. Pettigrew then gazed at his Master with the strangest expression Harry had ever seen him wear. A slow, rather mad-looking smile spread across his face, and then he was laughing maniacally.

"Shouldn't you call me *Moonchild*?" he asked Riddle. Despite his attempt to maintain his composure, he was shaking visibly.

"I shall call you *dead* if you do not answer me immediately!" Riddle shrieked, looking completely irrational. Harry couldn't decide which of them was closer to being insane.

"Are you refraining from calling me *Moonchild* so that you do not have to think about the role I played in your losing your power?" He looked at Draco Malfoy, at Ginny, and finally at Harry. "The Second Triangle is here, Master. I am no longer needed to watch and wait, to prepare. I have—faith," he said in a queer, quiet voice, raising one eyebrow.

"I said to keep torturing the werewolf! I have given you a direct order!"

Pettigrew's shaking had ceased; he looked first at Ron and said, "I am sorry. You were a good and kind Master." Ron looked at him in disbelief as Pettigrew then looked directly at Riddle, saying in a clear, even voice, "I shall not."

And with that, he suddenly fell over dead.

The life was simply gone from him. His body was an empty shell lying in a heap on the ground, his robes too large for the skin-and-bones body to which he had been reduced. Ron found that he could lift his arms and legs from the ground, that upon Pettigrew's death the spell that created his invisible bonds was broken. He didn't stand, though. Instead he crawled over to Pettigrew and gently closed his eyes with his hand.

"I forgive you," he whispered, swallowing. Harry could see the tears rolling down his face, and he could also see that Ron's scarred, burnt chest was already healing over. The skin wasn't as smooth as before but pink and new, the burnt, scabby skin already peeling away. Ron stood, then helped his still-bound sister to stand. Harry found that he couldn't stop looking at Pettigrew's still form.

"What killed him?" he choked, even as the only possible explanation began to prickle at the back of his mind.

"Harry," Ginny whispered. "I think—the *Obedience Charm*—"

He had absolutely no doubt that she was right. "You put the *Obedience Charm* on him, didn't you? Just like you put it on Malfoy. Just like you would have put it on me if my parents had promised me to you," Harry growled at Riddle, a fury he had not expected welling up inside him. The older wizard looked highly suspicious.

"How do you know about that?" he demanded.

"That's *my* business," Harry snarled.

Riddle looked scornfully at Harry, the corner of his mouth turning up in an evil half-grin. "Of *course* I put the *Obedience Charm* on him!" He looked at the dead body, his voice taking on a boastful tone. "He did not know at first. Then, through the eyes of Quirrell, my servant, I saw and recognized him again. On the night I lost my body, I had seen him change into a rat, having arrived for our meeting before he knew I was there. I understood then why he called himself 'Wormtail.' I did not tell him that I knew he was an *Animagus*, however. He had kept this from me, his Master. Now I had a secret from him, in addition to the *Obedience Charm*, of course. One day, I had Quirrell use the rat to demonstrate a spell during a lesson. Speaking through Quirrell, so that no one else could hear, I told him that I knew who he really was, and I gave him a direct order—to help me become *myself* again. Quirrell was both empowered and weakened by my possession of him. I wished to have another servant upon whom I could rely, should Quirrell fail. A servant to whom I had given some of my own power. I told him of the charm, so that he would understand the consequences of refusing my order. He neither accepted nor refused, but continued to live as your friend's pet rat for another two years," he said disdainfully. "Then, when his true identity was revealed, he came to find me at last in Albania, and he finally gave me an answer. You would not believe the things he went through for me....Once he agreed, he was bound to do whatever it took, even cutting off his own right hand....there is no fighting the charm. That, I do think, was one of the cleverest things I've ever thought of...Even *you* must concede that...."

"I concede nothing," Harry growled. Screams and groans emanated from the edge of the circle, but they stood in a strangely quiet eye of the storm, the three of them facing Riddle and Draco Malfoy. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw that Ron had broken Ginny's bonds. He tried

to move behind Harry, to free him as well, but he wasn't quick enough.

"M'Lord!" Draco Malfoy cried. "Weasley!" He'd spotted what Ron was up to.

"*Crucio!*" Riddle cried out, pointing at Ron, who ducked behind Harry. The curse hit Harry instead, and he immediately felt hot knives slicing all of the flesh from his bones, no chance to prepare for the curse. He wasn't certain how long the curse had been on him when he was finally able to steel his mind against the pain and float up, up, up, so that he could see everything happening with excruciating slowness.

Ron's mouth moved as he looked at Harry; it appeared that he was saying simply, "*Sorry, mate.*" Ron knew he could take it, Harry thought. He didn't blame Ron, for he saw the reason for his wanting Riddle to be occupied. Ron looked at Riddle, crying out something else, too many words for Harry to make out this time, before turning and running at the circle's perimeter, making a spectacular leap into the air as though he were once again doing a kata. He knocked two Death Eaters to the ground at the same time. Even without a wand, Ron was joining in the fight. Riddle broke the link with Harry and pointed his wand in Ron's direction, his mouth moving slowly, so slowly, and a green arc of light emerged from the tip of his wand like a thread slowly unraveling from a piece of cloth....

But Ron was too fast even for this, and when the curse finally struck someone, it was a Death Eater whom Riddle felled, one of his own servants, the body drifting to earth, the man's eyes wide and surprised. Ron was leaping at yet another Death Eater, dodging another curse, and now this Death Eater fell slowly to the ground, dropping his wand, clutching his chest (where Ron had kicked him) with his other hand. Harry willed himself to return to his body, gasping when he was fully integrated again, abruptly treated to the sound of Riddle shrieking with rage over having accidentally killed one of his own. He could also hear now the screams of one Death Eater after another being attacked by Ron.

Although Harry was still bound, he didn't feel that Ron had abandoned them, as he was doing everything in his power to help the Aurors eliminate Riddle's support. And Ginny was not bound, thanks to Ron. She did not reach for her wand, however. She had another weapon in mind.

"Tom," she said, a choke in her voice. "Please stop this. This isn't what you really wanted when you were young. You never *intended* to kill that girl. Just because you *did* kill her didn't automatically *make* you a murderer. I know what happened, Tom. I know that you thought having the ability to speak to snakes made you like your ancestor, Slytherin. I know that you thought you could be as great a wizard as he was if you opened the Chamber and mastered what was within. You were hurt by your father rejecting you and your mother, and hurt again that other Slytherins didn't think you worthy of their house—"

"No! Not *their* house! *My* house!" Riddle was shaking with fury. "How do you know these things? How *dare* you speak to me this way?" he cried, a note of madness in his voice.

Ginny, for her part, seemed oddly calm. "I dare because I *know* you, Tom. I already told you—I wrote in your diary. For almost a year, I poured out all of my thoughts to you and you in turn told me about your life. It was to make me trust you, and it did, although I know I shouldn't have done. Still—I can't forget the things you told me. I know how the other children at the orphanage treated you, I know how the other Slytherins treated you, because you lived with Muggles. I know how you wanted to prove yourself to them, prove that you were the greatest wizard of all. I know how long and hard you worked, hours and hours of revision. I know how proud you were to be made a prefect! I know, Tom, I know it all—"

Riddle was turning white with rage. "Ginny!" Harry tried to warn her. "Please—are you trying to—" But suddenly, he knew what she was trying to do. He felt no doubt at all. "Don't, Ginny! Please!" he pleaded with her, his heart feeling like it was going to leap out of his chest. But she wouldn't look at him.

"Kill me!" she cried. "Kill me instead of Harry!" Harry shook his head, unable to believe that this was happening. He wished he'd never let her see his Pensieve, see what his mother had done just before Voldemort had tried to curse him. This wasn't what he wanted....

"Silence!" Riddle cried, his eyes blazing. He looked at Harry, smirking. "Yes, I could tell what she was trying to do as well, Potter. Needle me, get under my skin, then ask to be killed in your place. Then, when I curse you, you would be protected by her love. How sweet. How—what is the word for it? *Wrong.*" He turned a twisted smile to Ginny. "Yes, I shall kill you, girl, and he shall watch. But I shall not kill *him* after that. At least, not directly. He shall waste away, day after day, having to remember seeing you die for him every second of every day...."

Harry tried to move toward her but Riddle waved his hand and suddenly Harry's feet were planted to the ground. Ginny's feet were also firmly attached to the earth; the two of them were still about eight feet apart, with the bulky plow Portkey between them. Harry thought, *If only we could at least*

touch! But he had to settle for looking at her.

"I love you Ginny," he said, his voice breaking.

"I love you, Harry." He could barely make out what she was saying in a hoarse whisper. There was a roar of noise in his head, as though a throng of people were saying to him, *You failed. You failed. You failed.*

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

"*Nooooooo!*"

Almost simultaneous with his Master beginning to say the curse, Draco Malfoy's cry rang in Harry's ears and he watched in disbelief as the other boy threw himself in the path of the curse, taking the brunt of the crackling green death and falling to the ground, his eyes wide and unseeing, the life drained from him.

Riddle swore violently. "Stupid whelp! That's two servants I've lost now!" Two servants who had to be obedient unto death, that is, Harry thought. He was obviously ignoring the plight of his *other* servants; there were definitely Death Eater bodies visible through the chaos of battle around them, and the circle had closed in, tighter, filling in the gaps, as the remaining Death Eaters continued to attempt to protect their Master. Harry could also see Aurors on the grass, some apparently dead, some groaning. Then he had a flash of someone lying on the grass who was excessively tall, with bright orange hair, and he felt like he couldn't breathe, but a moment later Ron staggered to his feet and went on fighting. Harry let out his breath and turned to Riddle, who was clutching his wand tightly, glaring at Draco Malfoy's body at his feet.

Kicking the body with malicious carelessness, Riddle mumbled, "I always thought he would turn out to be a suicide, and I was right." He looked at Ginny. "But I have unfinished business with *you*, do I not?" Ginny's face was streaming with tears again as she gazed down at Draco Malfoy's lifeless body. Then she lifted her chin and gazed defiantly at Riddle.

"I'm not afraid to die," she said, her voice shaking.

Riddle laughed. "Oh, but you *should* be, little girl. You should be *very* afraid. For one thing, it is only sensible. Why do you think I have striven so long and hard to avoid death myself? Besides—I can tell that you are lying. You *are* afraid. Quite, quite afraid," he said, thoroughly enjoying himself. Harry couldn't look; he squeezed his eyes shut, still seeing Ginny, as though her image were imprinted on the inside of his eyelids. He thought desperately, *How can I get him hacked off at me, too, so I can die and be with her? I can't not be with her...*

But suddenly, his eyes flew open, and he could see nothing but Ginny. He tried to blink, but nothing happened, and he realized that Riddle must have done something to prevent him from closing his eyes again. Harry remembered him doing this to Karkaroff, before killing him at Dover. His eyes started to water.

"You are going to *see* this, Potter," Riddle said menacingly. Almost with the same breath, no more warning than that, he pointed his wand at Ginny and cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

This time there were no obstructions between him and her body; the crackling green light zoomed toward her and touched her brow. Harry's eyes strained and strained to close, but it was no good. His sight was filled with Ginny, Ginny dying....

Only it wasn't.

She seemed to be trembling all over, very fast, and a bluish-white glow emanated from her that grew by the second, until Harry thought he would be blinded by her radiance. His eyes were streaming from not being able to blink, and still the blinding light coming from Ginny grew and grew, the crackling green arc of light still connecting her to Riddle, who looked like he couldn't have dropped his wand if he'd wanted to; it was difficult for Harry to see his face, because of Ginny's glow, but now he could dimly discern that the arc of light was going in the *other* direction, from Ginny to Riddle.

Riddle's arm was shaking as the curse went through him, but unlike the night Harry's parents were killed, he did not utter a sound; he simply dropped his wand, severing the connection, his body falling to the ground with a dull thud.

Harry realized he'd been holding his breath when he let it out in a long exhalation. He blinked—then realized that he *could*. He put his hands up to his face—then realized that he could do that, too. His feet were no longer bound to the earth, either, and he ran around the plow to get to Ginny, who was still standing where she had been as though too stunned to move. He threw his arms around her and hugged her limp body; she gazed up at him, her eyes practically catatonic, peering out through wild strands of hair. She seemed utterly drained.

"You did it!" he cried. "He's—he's dead! You did it, Ginny!"

She shook her head, still not looking quite sensible. "No....*he* did it. All I did was to get him hacked off at me, make him want to kill me sooner. But Draco...he died in my place....And you

tricked Tom into eating the sweets, else he'd have been like he was before, a sort of ghost and yet not a ghost...."

"Goading him wasn't doing nothing, though, Ginny. You knew just how to get under his skin. You knew things that no one else could have...."

She sighed in resignation. "All right, Harry. We all did something, are you happy?" Her words ended on a sob as she knelt and gazed at the still form of Draco Malfoy. Harry swallowed, also looking down at Draco. He hadn't meant to upset her, but it was true. The three of them had all done something—

The three of them had fulfilled the Prophecy.

He looked at Draco Malfoy and then to where Peter Pettigrew lay, on the far side of the plow. "The Moon Children," he whispered. "They both sacrificed themselves."

She shook her head. "I don't understand why he cursed me, after Draco was killed. He knew what I was doing when I told him to kill me instead of you, yet he went ahead and tried to kill me after Draco took the curse...."

Harry remembered Voldemort giving Draco Malfoy a package and telling him that "the girl" was beneath him. Draco had responded that she was pureblood....Harry knew they were discussing Mariah. Had Voldemort thought Mariah was the only girl about whom Draco Malfoy cared? "I think he didn't know how Draco felt about you. I don't think he thought of it as Draco dying because he loved you. He called it a suicide, remember."

"We were always assuming the worst of him, but Draco didn't really betray us," she said sadly, gently closing the still, grey eyes with her hand. "He didn't have free will. But he did betray Voldemort. Tom."

Harry frowned. "Why are you talking about his betraying us? I didn't say he did." *I thought it, though.*

"Don't you know the full Prophecy?" Harry shook his head and she recited it for him, finishing with, "*The Lion loves the Daughter bright, As does the child of silver moon, But the Dark Lord's servant shall betray. What though they flee before their fate, Three shall bring forth the days of doom, And Love shall end the Dark Lord's reign.*" Maggie told me," she whispered.

"Betray...." Harry mumbled, looking down at Draco's waxy face. He shook his head. "I knew he was—he was capable of sacrificing himself to help me change the timelines, but this—"

Suddenly, he couldn't help thinking, *It isn't fair.*

Why, though? another voice in his head argued.

Because she doesn't love him. He died for love, but it was all one-sided....If I could have moved, I would have taken the curse for her....

But you couldn't move. He knew that. And what makes you think he just did it for her? Perhaps he did it for you, too.

This thought startled Harry, and made him think yet again of the boy who had been his best friend for most of his other life. He stared down at the still body. *It still isn't fair,* he thought. *He's a hero, but he'll only be honored in death. He'll never be able to LIVE as a hero.*

Life isn't fair. You know that.

That doesn't mean I have to like it.

Ginny cried on him while he held her tightly, all the while looking at Draco Malfoy's face over her shoulder, aware of the fights still going on, just beyond the circle of Death Eaters. They were all keeping busy enough that none had yet noticed the fate of their Master. He couldn't help the memories flooding his head, memories of growing up with Draco, traveling around the country with him, writing in the diary. In the end, he had shown his true colors. He had been the Draco Malfoy Harry had known he always could be, if he really wanted to. And with that, his life had ended. *It should be a beginning,* he thought. *Not an end.* He sighed. There was nothing he could do now, though. Dead was dead.

Dead is dead.

He remembered Hermione saying that, when they were discussing the spell in his snake book. But according to that book, dead was *not* dead.

Maybe.

"The Griffin shall fly."

Harry sighed. Sandy was no doubt correct; he would need to fly before long, join in the battle, which seemed to have been raging forever. It was his duty to do whatever he could to fight. He looked regretfully down at Draco's startled face. *Sorry, mate. Duty calls.*

But even as he was standing and pulling Ginny to her feet, suddenly, the cries from the battle increased in volume, a cacophonous crescendo, and they looked up to see, between the backs of

the Death Eaters, still oblivious to their Master's fate, elves appearing all over with sharp *cracks!* He couldn't help but grin when he saw that, and then he spotted Hermione, too, and Professor McGonagall, and Flitwick, plus a number of students from the Dueling Club. He even saw students appear who hadn't passed the test to Apparate, clutching things like brooms and rolls of parchment, and he knew that these were things hastily chosen to be made into Portkeys in order to get the best fighters to the battle.

However, he could see, despite the new troops, that the battle was going very badly. The Death Eaters were far more ruthless in their tactics than the Aurors had been; he realized, with a shock, that there were now *more* Death Eaters in the circle than there had been at the start, and that was despite many of them having fallen. Harry knew then that Voldemort had probably been right, that even the Death Eaters in prison at the Ministry had done whatever they could to come. Perhaps the Aurors who had been recruited to come fight would normally have been guarding the Ministry cells. Perhaps it had been one of the Death Eaters still working undercover at the Ministry; if even one Death Eater put Imperius on the cellblock guards, that could do it....

He remembered the feeling of helpless momentum pulling him on when he'd been in the woods with Tom Riddle, the frustration at not being the master of his own destiny. He had been able to fight Imperius, but he couldn't fight the Obedience Charm. It had been such a relief when he'd thought of setting the diary afire, and he was so relieved that it had worked, that Riddle disappeared, his wand falling to the ground....

Wand.

Harry looked down, seeing Voldemort's wand where it lay next to the body of the dead wizard. He looked again at Draco and thought, *Maybe there is a way.* A way to fight and win the battle and still do something about the price Draco had had to pay. He started breathing more quickly, knowing what he was going to do. First he put his hand out and closed his eyes, concentrating as hard as he could on the night his parents died, on Riddle disappearing while the diary burned. He could see it in his mind's eye, he could....

Without even bothering to take out his wand, he opened his eyes and kept his arm out, hand ready, crying loudly, "*Accio wand!*"

The right wand, the wand he wanted, soon came soaring out of the trees. He could see it clearly, flying over the heads of those embroiled in the battle, and then it was falling toward him. He caught it deftly, turning it over and over in his hands, wiping the dirt and rotten leaves from it, revealing the yew wood, as hardy as ever. His fingers tingled as he touched it, and red and gold sparks spouted from the end. He gasped, never having seen another wand respond that way to him except his own. He bent to pick up its identical twin brother from the ground; this one had been better cared for, but it was clearly exactly like the wand Harry had summoned. This one also vibrated in his hand and spouted the red and gold sparks.

He could hear Sirius' voice in his head, from three years earlier: "*So what happens when a wand meets its brother?*"

"They will not work properly against each other...If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle...a very rare effect will take place..." Dumbledore had said.

But what, Harry wondered, would happen if two *identical* wands met each other? He didn't think the people wielding the wands would be hurt, just as neither he nor Voldemort were hurt when their wands locked, but he also remembered the way the web of golden light distracted and confounded the Death Eaters who were present just after Voldemort regained his body. And the shades....perhaps the shades would once again help distract. Both wands would be Voldemort's, so it didn't matter whose wand was forced to regurgitate its spells. Either way, if it caused *Priori Incantatem* to happen again, the shades of people he had killed would appear....

He had to try it. Only—he didn't want it to be him. There was other work he had to attend to. *Twin brother wands!* he thought again. Had this ever happened? He didn't think it likely. *Too bad both Fred and George aren't here—I wonder what effect there would be from twin brothers wielding twin wands.*

Then he turned and saw Ginny, kneeling by Draco Malfoy's body, thinking, *Yes. That's it. And then she won't be able to stop me from doing what I have to do, she'll be far too busy....*

"Ginny!" he cried. "Get out your wand! You may need to protect yourself. I'm going to get Ron. We need him."

She didn't argue but took out her wand, standing to attention, wiping her face with her sleeve and nodding at him. He handed her the two identical wands.

"Keep these safe until I get back with Ron."

She nodded again, but then both of them stood transfixed as the red and gold sparks shot from the wands again, vibrating in her hand. She looked up at Harry in alarm, her brown eyes wide

through her tousled hair, which was obscuring half her face. He quickly changed into his griffin form and took a running leap into the air, spreading his wings, feeling the familiar exhilaration soar through him. He was no sooner in the air, however, than he saw one of the Death Eaters turn to check on his Master, seeing only the three dead bodies near the plow and Ginny in the center of the circle, holding Voldemort's two identical wands. She had evidently put her own wand away.

The Death Eater shouted something and pointed his wand at her, but she immediately put up both wands, cried out an incantation, and a bluish shield crackled around her, deflecting the curse. She then pointed one of the wands at the wizard and sent him flying backward, his wand soaring in a high arc and into her waiting hand. He saw her throw his wand on the ground and incinerate it with the other Voldemort wand. Ginny was simply crackling with power, and Harry turned away to look for Ron, satisfied that she was indeed the Daughter of War, that she could hold her own. At the back of his mind, something nagged at him, the reason for her increased power, but he pushed this thought away and concentrated on trying to find Ron in the chaos below. He noticed that Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen, and he wondered at that.

He spotted Ron, finally, fighting hand to hand with a man dressed as a Muggle who seemed every bit as strong as Ron, each of them throwing the other over their heads and yet getting up and coming back for more. Then Harry noticed more people battling the professors, Aurors, elves and Dueling Club members, all of them dressed like Muggles, many of the men excessively hairy. Harry immediately guessed who they were:

Voldemort's werewolves.

He had recruited werewolves to join him and had evidently provided them with Portkeys, which took them to him when he activated their Dark Marks. (Harry could see the Mark on the arm of the man who was fighting with Ron.) They must have arrived after the Death Eaters, he thought.

To help Ron, Harry came right down on the head of the werewolf he was battling. The man cried out in pain, then, to Harry's shock, he threw Harry about twenty feet, making him gasp with pain when he landed. Harry was very close to his parents' house now and he changed back to his human form, taking out his wand and pointing it at the man.

"Stupefy!"

The werewolf went over like a board, and Ron ran to Harry, not even breathing heavily. "Thanks, mate. He was really starting to annoy me. Wish I had my wand....he wouldn't have done so well against me then—"

"You want a wand?" Harry said, raising his eyebrow. "Have I got a wand for *you*. I'm going to transform again; when I do, get on and we'll fly back to the center of the circle. I have a job for you."

Ron frowned, not understanding, but Harry had no sooner said this than Ron pulled him to the ground, several curses flying over their heads as some Death Eaters noticed that they were alone and vulnerable. Harry pulled out his wand and handed it to Ron. "Don't bloody lose it," he growled, changing into a griffin and taking to the air again. Now Ron was able to use his Dueling Club experience. Harry was going to help him, but then he saw a contingent of about a dozen elves fighting four wizards and doing very badly; in the time it took him to notice them, three of the elves were felled by curses. He flew over the heads of the Death Eaters and landed behind them, changing back as soon as his paws touched earth and holding out his arms, concentrating very hard on the middle two wizards, who seemed to be the most troublesome.

"Expelliarmus! he cried, remembering disarming Lucius Malfoy when he was a seven-year-old, when he was angry enough, in his other life. The two wands flew up and out of the wizards' hands and they fell to the ground, grunting.

"Remember your training!" Harry cried to the elves, catching the wands as they flew neatly into his hand. "Flanking formation! Keep moving!" While they were on the ground, Harry stunned the wizards with one of their own wands before breaking the wands over his knee.

The elves seemed to have woken up. Immediately, three of them disappeared with a *crack!* to appear behind the two remaining wizards, who whirled in surprise. The other six elves disappeared and then reappeared, three to the left and three to the right of the surprised wizards. With a collective motion, the elves all sent the two men whooshing through the air, colliding painfully with each other, knocking them unconscious. One of the elves—who, like all of them, were in uniform, he noted—clicked his heels together and saluted Harry smartly, saying, "Thank you, General Harry Potter, sir! We is proud to serve under you!"

Harry couldn't help grinning at him, but he returned the salute properly. "Carry on, Lieutenant. Remember what you've all been taught. You can do this!"

"Yes, sir, General Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked the elf, nodding at his fellows, who all disappeared with a *crack!* Harry ran back to Ron, now fighting yet another werewolf, who was reduced to cowering on the ground, looking very frightened.

"Confundus Charm," Ron said, nodding at the man. "Thinks he's around three now, he does. Where's Ginny, Harry? Is she all right? What's happening? Where's You-Know-Who?"

Harry gawped at him. "You don't know? I'll show you. And Ginny's fine. You'll see. Trust me—she can hold her own."

He changed again. Once Ron was seated on him and clutching his mane tightly, he leapt into the air, moving back toward Ginny. He landed next to her; she'd fought off some more Death Eaters, single-handedly, and was standing by the plow holding both wands, her eyes wild.

"Where'd that come from?" Ron wanted to know, nodding at Ginny's extra wand. Then, remembering that he had Harry's wand, he gave it back to him.

"Thanks. It's Voldemort's. So's the other one. They're identical. I summoned the one from the woods that was left there when I fixed the timelines. It's just been sitting there for seventeen years."

Ron looked at Harry open-mouthed. "How did you get his bleeding wand from him?" But then Harry pointed to the far side of the plow and Ron strode over to the bodies in disbelief. "And Malfoy's dead, too? He killed Malfoy? Or did you do it?" he added hopefully.

"He leapt in front of the Killing Curse, Ron," Ginny said, with tears in her voice. "He died for me."

"Incidentally, Ron," Harry said, trying to divert Ginny, "have you seen Dumbledore at all?" It had been such a relief when he arrived at Stonehenge; Harry had expected to see him by now.

Ron looked grim, shaking his head. "No, Harry, I haven't. He must have been worried about leaving Hogwarts undefended. Probably stayed there just in case this was a ruse and You-Know-Who planned to attack the school."

Harry nodded in agreement, although something about this felt very wrong to him. He had a bad feeling about it in the pit of his stomach. Ron was staring uneasily at the dead form of Draco Malfoy. "So *what* do you want me to do?" he said in confusion. "Use You-Know-Who's wand?"

"No. I want you to use *Tom Riddle's* wand. Against Ginny. Who will also be using Tom Riddle's wand. You need to cast spells against each other—preferably *identical* spells, like the Disarming Charm, to try to get the wands to lock. You are brother and sister. The wands are identical twins. The power of this—I expect this to produce a quite spectacular effect. We can use this to our advantage...."

He explained to them that it didn't matter whose wand produced the reverse spell effect. Ron nodded. "All right. It's worth a try. What do you want us to do?"

He sent them to opposite sides of the circle and shouted with his hands cupped around his mouth, "Cast the spell at each other on my signal! Make sure the wands lock!"

They both nodded, grim as death, waiting for the sign from him. He lifted his own wand, and they simultaneously pointed the wands at each other, crying out in unison, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The arcs of red light met in the air. Harry wanted to weep for joy; he could see that both Ginny and Ron were struggling to keep their grips on the vibrating wands as the beam of light connecting them changed color from red to deep gold, just as he remembered it. Ginny was using two hands, her knuckles white, and he could see grim determination on Ron's face.

Then—he remembered this happening to him and Voldemort—their feet left the ground, the wands still connected by the thread of light. They were drifting over toward the sloping green meadow on the far side of the cottage's ruins, away from the trees. Everyone on the ground who had been embroiled in battle stood stock-still and gazed up in wonder.

The golden thread binding them multiplied now, the strands arcing high over Ginny and Ron, creating a golden dome under which the Aurors and elves now instinctively sheltered, along with the professors and students. The Death Eaters and werewolves shouted at them from outside the dome, clearly confused. They tried attacking, but those under the protection of the dome could not be touched, and Harry saw more than one curse deflected from the golden web, while multiple curses were able to leave the dome, finding their marks, felling one attacker after another. And then he saw that a shade had emerged from the wand Ron was holding; it appeared to be Draco Malfoy. He slid down the dome into the midst of the Death Eaters and werewolves, scattering them....Then more shades began to emerge from the wand, and Harry swallowed, seeing that it was *working*.

Finally, the most wonderful sound met his ears: *phoenix song*. The sound of hope. It was far louder and more resonant than he remembered, but that might have been because the two wands were identical, rather than just brother wands. The music filled his heart, which felt like it would burst; he knew that they could *do* this. It was going to work. He looked down at Draco Malfoy's body, thinking of the spritely shade he had just seen. Draco would be doing that again, walking the earth, but not just as a shade if Harry had anything to do with it. No one could stop him now. He could do what he had to do, what should be done. And more importantly, he knew that the others were going to be all right, he wasn't abandoning them in their time of need. They were going to be fine....

The music sang in his head and his heart as he reached into his sleeve and pulled out Sandy. She looked up at him guilelessly.

"Yes, Harry Potter? Did you not understand the last thing that I saw?"

"No, Sandy, that was actually very easy. I understood it just fine. Sorry I didn't say anything. I need you for something now. For a special spell." The phoenix song made his entire body feel like it was made of music.

"What am I to do?" she asked obligingly. "You are not going to turn me into a human girl again, are you?"

He laughed; the music made him feel he could accomplish *anything*. "No, but I am going to put an engorgement spell on you. It will make you much larger."

She seemed to nod. "Very well, Harry Potter. You may do so."

He placed her on the ground, pointing his wand at her and saying, "*Engorgio!*"

He did not terminate the spell immediately but kept his wand trained on her; she began to both lengthen and expand in thickness, and he did not lift his wand to break the spell until she was about fifteen feet long. When he did lift it, he felt quite drained, and wondered whether he had enough energy and concentration left to execute the next spell. Could he do it? He *had* to do it. He had a moment of doubt, glancing at Riddle's body. *If it will bring back Riddle, too, I won't do it*, he thought. He gazed down at Draco Malfoy's face. It just wasn't fair. He was a hero. He didn't deserve this. Tom Riddle did, but not Draco, not his best friend, not after what he'd done for Ginny....

Sandy said something to him then, in a far deeper voice than he'd ever heard her use. He shook his head, not really comprehending it. "Are you still predicting things that are going to happen in a few minutes, Sandy? Or is your Sight that of a large snake now?"

She paused a moment in thought. "I think that it is possible that your having increased my size has increased the depth and breadth of my Sight."

He nodded; that made sense. Which meant that he did not need to worry immediately about what she'd said. It did give him hope, though, for the future. That was something. If she was right, then he *had* to do this. He just had to.

"Put your tail in your mouth, please, Sandy."

"Very well, Harry Potter."

Harry picked up the body of Draco Malfoy, which felt strangely insubstantial, and stepped into the ring formed by Sandy biting her own tail. He glanced at the dome of golden light, his heart feeling like it would burst. *They were doing it; they were really doing it....*

He looked at the boy whose lifeless shell he held, remembering the friend who had traveled by his side all the way from Huntly to London, to Dover and back to London, and finally to this place....

"Draco, why don't you try to use Voldemort's wand to do the spell with me? Then when the timeline changes back, you'll remember this life. You'll remember Jamie..."

"But I don't want to remember..."

"Draco, why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Writing in the diary. Sacrificing yourself."

"You know why, Harry. So you can fix the timelines."

"But-what I mean is-You said you were no friend; that you'd done something awful. And I've thought and thought about it, and I can't for the life of me figure out what could have been so bad."

"You'll hate me if I tell you."

"No I won't. And even if it's as dreadful as you say-you're obviously trying to make up for it."

"No matter what I do, Harry, even this, there's never really any making up for it. You don't understand..."

Draco had done what he needed to do, Harry knew. He had done everything possible to warn Ginny without running afoul of that damned Obedience Charm. It wasn't his fault that they hadn't been able to prevent Ron from touching the plow, it wasn't his fault that Ginny was swept along....

I have to do this.

He swallowed and pointed his wand at the heavens.

"Enuma!"

In the distance, a faint rumbling was heard.

"Elish!"

The rumbling grew ever louder and he saw dark clouds begin moving swiftly across the sky, which was darkening by the second.

"Tiamat!"

The clouds were overhead now, lightning flashing in a blood-red sky.

"Apsu!"

A lightning bolt struck the ground at Harry's feet and the earth trembled; around the golden dome, he could see the remaining Death Eaters and werewolves falling to the ground, as well as those under the dome's protection, even the small soldiers of the Elven Army. Only Ginny and Ron, hovering in the air, seemed immune. Harry struggled to keep a firm hold on his wand and Draco Malfoy's body. A fissure opened at his feet that was nonetheless contained within the encompassing circle of Sandy's body. The fissure opened wider and wider and Harry shook from head to toe, staring into its inky depths. His heart was in his throat; he knew what he must do, but every fiber of his being fought against it now that he was confronted with the fact of it. The human being's basic survival instinct was beating against his brain, willing him to continue to live, to be of this world.

He thought of his mother, how every instinct in her must have been saying, *"Save yourself! Save your child!"* He thought of how he had amplified that inner voice for her when he put the Imperius Curse on her. How very hard it must have been for her to deny that voice, to say, *"Kill me!"* He swallowed; he had always idolized his father, had always wanted to be like him in any way he could. But now, now, he needed to be his mother's son, he had to have all of her nerve and daring to do this....

Finally, with a defiant yell, he leapt, and in that second when his head disappeared below the surface of the earth, the fissure closed with a sudden sucking sound, and the shaking of the earth ceased. All was quiet. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were nowhere to be seen. They had gone where none could follow....

...into the abyss.

* * * * *

Harry knew he was falling, but he didn't know for how long. He no longer felt the dead weight of the body in his arms, although he could feel the wood of his wand under his fingers. He was surrounded by blackness.

Down, down...Or was it? He became aware of the fact that he had merely assumed that he was falling because he had jumped into an opening in the earth; now he realized that although he felt movement, his senses could not tell him whether it was up, down or sideways. That inner sense that tells most creatures of earth which way is up did not seem to be functioning at all. Harry could have been a new satellite orbiting the earth; he had no way to judge. There was nothingness all around him.

Time passed; Harry did not know how much. He found himself thinking about many things. He thought of girls he'd kissed or made love to; Ginny, Hermione, Katie, Cho, Alicia, Mariah, Ginny again...He thought about playing Quidditch, and about that first exhilarating ride on a broomstick when he was eleven and about the thrill of playing Quidditch for Wales...He thought about his friends, about meeting Ron on the Hogwarts express, about growing up with Draco and Jamie, about running with Dudley and dueling with Neville...He thought about looking up to Severus Snape as his stepfather, about his one hour of happiness when he was not quite fourteen and thought he might be able to go live with Sirius, about Remus Lupin teaching him to conjure a Patronus and Aberforth teaching him to work the soil...He remembered his heart welling up inside him when Dumbledore had raised his goblet to him after the Triwizard Tournament...He saw again in his mind's eye that moment when Hagrid burst through the door of the hut on the rock and told Harry that he was a wizard...He thought of Professor McGonagall smiling at him in approval when he'd first done the Animagus transfiguration, about Mrs. Weasley letting him cry on her after Cedric's death, about his argument with his mother and holding her in his arms afterward while she cried...He thought of bringing Cedric's body back to the Diggorys and carrying Dudley's coffin to the graveyard and then throwing the fistful of dirt on its lid, watching his brother Stuart die, holding his mother's body again after he'd disarmed her, mourning Ginny and the baby that never was...leaping from the fortress of Azkaban as a golden griffin, flying to freedom on the mainland, and returning to the prison to free the Aurors...

He fell or rose or drifted in nothingness, his thoughts coming thick and fast, and he wondered whether he was dead now, too, and this was what his eternity would be like, drifting aimlessly through blackness with his chaotic thoughts, no rhyme or reason to give form and meaning to it all....

Then he stopped. It was as though someone had suddenly slid a shelf under his feet, upon which he now stood with shaky legs. Light appeared so abruptly that he put his hand up and covered the lenses of his glasses; then he carefully lowered his hand and blinked, looking around. He still clutched his wand.

He was out of doors, standing on the path leading up to Hogwarts castle. It was a beautiful day; Harry could not identify the season, but the trees were green, rather than turning colors or still bearing blossoms, so perhaps it was summer. He stared at the castle; he had started to think he would never see it again, but here he was. He wondered again whether he was still alive. Somehow, he had lost Draco Malfoy's body. He looked down at his empty arm, which had been holding Draco when he leapt. Harry swallowed; he had just realized that there was no breeze; not a breath of wind stirred the grass or the leaves on the trees. He walked slowly toward the doors to the entrance hall. In the back of his mind, he knew he couldn't really be at Hogwarts, but somehow it was comforting to see it....

"Yes, it is comforting, isn't it?"

Harry's jaw had dropped; suddenly, standing on the steps to the castle was his sister. She looked as she had the last time he'd seen her. Her long dark hair was touched with red where the light hit it, and her green eyes sparkled when she smiled, as she did now. He ran toward her, gasping, expecting her to recede from him and change, as she had in his dreams, but instead he was able to throw his arms around her. He held her tightly, unable to believe she was really here, burying his face in her hair.

"Jamie! Oh, I never thought I'd see you again. Oh, Jamie, Jamie," he repeated like a litany, kissing her on the forehead, then hugging her again. When she did not respond in kind, instead looking up at him dispassionately, Harry sensed that something was wrong. He backed up.

"You find me comforting too, don't you?"

Harry frowned; the cadence of her voice wasn't quite right. It was too stiff and rehearsed. He looked at her shrewdly and asked slowly, "Who are you, really?"

"I am Tiamat. But you can call me by your sister's name. You invoked me with your spell. I look like this because I determined that this would be comforting to you. This—" and she waved her hand at the castle, "also has an appearance that should be comforting and familiar to you."

Harry also waved his hand at the castle. "What is it really?"

Jamie smiled indulgently. "There are many names for it. The simplest way to explain it to you would be to call it the Realm of the Dead. My sister, Ereshkigal, is queen here, but I can act as your guide until we reach her. You must pass through seven gates..."

"Where's Draco? When I entered the abyss, I had his body. He's why I'm here. I—I want to save him. To bring him back to life, if I can. Can you tell me if it's even possible?"

She smiled at him. "Yes, it is possible. But only a handful of people who have attempted this over thousands of years have succeeded; the others were unwilling to do what was necessary to accomplish their goal. It is possible for someone who is willing. Are you willing?"

"Yes," he nodded vigorously. She closed her eyes and inclined her head in approval.

"Then we should begin."

She turned and knocked on the enormous front doors of the castle. The doors opened slowly and she stepped just inside them. When Harry tried to do the same, an invisible barrier prevented him from crossing the threshold and he could not follow her.

"What—"

"You must pay. As I said, there are seven gates. This is the first gate. At each gate you must pay or you cannot pass. If you still have something to offer for the life of this 'Draco' after you pass through the seventh gate, it is possible that you may save him. Of course, you still have to be willing. Otherwise, you will go back without him. If you have nothing you are willing to give in payment after passing through the seventh gate, you will return to your life without him and you may not ask for any other favors. This is a request that can only be made by a person once. Do you wish to begin? What will you give as your price for passing through the first gate?"

Harry stared at her, perplexed. "I—I don't know. What kind of thing would be all right? I don't know what you're looking for."

She nodded at him. "Your cloak will do nicely."

Harry shrugged it off impatiently, then passed it to her. Immediately, he was able to step across the threshold to stand in the cavernous entrance hall. Harry looked behind him, at the still landscape that looked so exactly like the real thing. He turned back to the girl who looked like his sister at fifteen.

"That's it? That's all I have to do?"

But he had no sooner asked than he felt an icy wind sweep down the marble stairs and engulf the entrance hall with an arctic blast. Harry hugged himself, his teeth chattering. She seemed unaffected by the sudden cold. She smiled sweetly at him and held the cloak out.

"Would you like it back?"

He stared at her and at his cloak; as tempting as it was, he needed to push on; he couldn't get discouraged now.

Through the clacking of his teeth, he said, "No, thank you. I'd-I'd like to move on."

She draped the cloak over the elaborately carved marble newel post at the foot of the stairs, exactly like the one at the real Hogwarts. Then she nodded at him and walked to the enormous closed doors of the Great Hall. She swung these open and the chill wind that had been sweeping through the entrance hall—which seemed not to affect her at all—abruptly ceased. Jamie looked at him expectantly. He looked back at her, perplexed.

"This is the second gate."

Harry looked at the hall; it appeared to be the same as ever. The four house tables stretched out before him, the candles floating above them, and the polished goblets on the head table caught the light and glittered in the distance. He turned to the facsimile of his sister.

"What do you want?"

"Do you wish to keep your robes?"

Harry looked down at his wizard robes, then back up at her. "I guess I can give them up," he said shakily. He removed the robes Mrs. Weasley had made for him, an ache in his heart, and handed them to her; he felt an inexplicable loss and emptiness without them. He cautiously stepped over the threshold and stood in the Great Hall, swallowing with apprehension. Suddenly, the hall was filled with students, all suddenly pointing at him and jeering.

"Oi! Look at the Muggle with no robes! Muggle, Muggle, no-robe Muggle..." a boy chanted, pointing at him. The next thing Harry knew, students of all ages were pointing at him and shouting, "*Muggle, Muggle, no-robe Muggle...*" There seemed to be thousands of people rather than hundreds. The voices echoed off the stone and reverberated around the huge chamber. Harry covered his hands with his ears. He could barely hear his sister when she spoke calmly to him, her placid face clearly not registering the cacophony of voices around them.

"Would you like your robes back?" she asked sweetly.

Harry's eyes were watering from the noise, his head throbbing. He wanted to be anywhere else in the world. All he could hear were cries of, "*MUGGLE! MUGGLE! MUGGLE!*"

He thought of the note Mrs. Weasley had sent him with the clothes she had made for him; he wondered what she would say if she knew he'd given them up. He vacillated, his heart in his throat. Then he remembered Draco, his almost-lifeless form lying on the bunk in the tent at Godric's Hollow, having given almost all of his strength, his life-force, so that Tom Riddle could emerge from the diary and be duped by Harry...

He shook his head, then shouted, "*NO!*"

The hall was still and utterly devoid of students. He and his sister were the only two people present, his last word still echoing in the cavernous space. He blinked and slowly took his hands down from his ears. His sister walked purposefully toward the door which hid the secret staircase to the Potions office. Harry followed her, looking around the hall again, thinking how vividly real those other people had been, yelling and shouting at him, pointing and jeering.

She opened the door and stopped, then turned to look at him expectantly. "Is this another gate?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked down. He was becoming more and more apprehensive. "Am I going to have any clothes left by the time I go through all seven gates?"

She gazed at him calmly. "When you were born, how many articles of clothing were you wearing?"

He swallowed; well, he thought, I guess that answers my question. "None."

She nodded. "Do you wish to go on?"

He sighed.

"If I give up my shirt, can I go through this gate?"

"Yes."

He unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders and arms. The air was rather pleasant on his shoulders and back, and he felt a warm current moving the sparse, almost invisible hair on his chest. She took the shirt from him and he followed her down the steep stairs, his stomach in knots as he waited with apprehension for something to happen.

Nothing did.

He reached the bottom and stopped, wondering why there didn't seem to be any catch this time. There was no light, but he could sense her presence ahead of him in the passage. He was tempted to light his wand, but he didn't know whether it would even work in this realm. He heard her moving further away from him, so he sped up.

He walked straight into the spider webs.

They were at chest height, exactly where he would be most aware of them, now that he was shirtless. He flinched at the silky threads passing over his skin; he had gooseflesh all over his arms. Then he felt something drip on his shoulder from the ceiling of the passage, and he thought he was going to be sick. The salve that he'd applied to his skin in what seemed another lifetime was no longer in effect. He heard and felt more dripping, more globules of sticky gelatinous stuff falling on him, which now caused the webs to stick to his skin. He whirled, trying to brush the goo and webs off, fighting the urge to spew when it got on his left hand. He still held his wand tightly in his right hand. He stumbled along, trying to wipe more and more repulsive things from his skin. He finally stopped when he stumbled into his sister. Suddenly there was light; she was holding a candle in her right hand. The underside of her nose and chin were very bright, but her eyes were in shadow.

"Would you like your shirt back?" she said in a friendly voice, as though he weren't covered in slimy, crawling things he didn't want to think about. Something dropped on his shoulder and then started moving toward his neck. He swallowed, shaking.

"No," he said with his jaw clenched.

She touched the wall, which Harry knew pivoted and led into the office. "The fourth gate."

She seemed to be looking at him expectantly, although he still could not see her eyes. "Your boots and socks," she said.

"That's four things!"

"Your foot coverings, then. All of them. If you wish to continue."

Something else landed on his back, something with at least eight legs. He quickly bent over and pulled off his boots; his socks came off at the same time, so that he was standing in the passage barefoot and bare-chested, in just his breeches and underwear. She nodded and put her shoulder to the wall, opening it.

She crossed to the door of the office. He started to follow her; then he noticed that there was nothing on his shoulders or anywhere else on the skin above his waist. The spider webs and other things were gone. Unfortunately, his relief was short-lived, for suddenly the floor seemed to be on fire beneath his feet. He panicked, running mindlessly back toward the pivoting door into the passage, wincing with every step, then realized that he needed to just get it over with, so he dashed toward the door of the office, every step pure agony. It was worse than walking barefoot on hot coals; it was walking barefoot on the sun. His feet were blistered and there was damaged skin peeling off the balls and heels of both feet, revealing tender skin that was being further roasted with every step he took. Harry's eyes were watering and he fought the very, very strong urge to cry for mercy.

"Would you—" she began to say, standing calmly on the burning floor, apparently suffering no pain of any kind.

But Harry had already started ripping off his breeches; he threw them at her and flew at the office door that led into the potions classroom. He stood on the cool stone floor, breathing heavily, wiping the unshed tears from his eyes; he bent down, his hands on his knees. All he had left were his black boxers. He'd gone through five gates; there were two left, and he didn't have enough things to give up. But then he pushed his glasses up his nose and realized that he was wrong; he could give his glasses. If his sister would accept them, that would take him through seven gates.

He started walking through the potions classroom, relieved that he'd thought of this, but suddenly he was surrounded by nettles; thorny bushes seemed to have sprung up from the floor and were blocking his path to the corridor. The thorns seemed to be specifically positioned to attack his legs, and before long, his thighs and calves were skinned and bleeding profusely as he tried to make his way across the room. He used his wand to push some of the worse-looking thorns out of the way, but after he passed, they whipped back and struck him painfully on the backs of his legs. Jamie was standing in the corridor, waiting for him. She didn't ask him whether he wanted his breeches back.

When he reached the door, he touched the air in the doorway, feeling the unyielding pressure again that indicated that the gate was closed to him. She looked at him dispassionately; he took off his glasses and handed them to the blur that now only vaguely resembled his sister, and walked through into the corridor. He'd gone through the sixth gate.

He looked down, and was not at all surprised to see that the skin of his legs was completely

intact; there were no long bloody gashes, no nettles sticking in his skin. He raised his head again and looked up and down the passage. "Which way now?" he asked, nervous about what might happen now that he didn't have his glasses. He liked to see the world clearly and always put his glasses on before getting out of bed every morning. She turned and walked deeper into the dungeons without a word. He followed her; she was moving toward Slytherin House.

They had gone only about ten feet when suddenly a gust of wind blew something in his eye; he squeezed it shut in pain. Then the wind grew stronger, and more and more small particles were striking his face and trying to squeeze in between his eyelids. He tried to put one hand in front of his face so that he could open his eyes a little but it felt like a large rock had blown in his left eye now. He turned around and bent over, trying to get it out, resisting the urge to curl up in a ball and cry. He rose and moved forward again, and now he simply walked with his eyes closed against the wind and the things it was blowing at him. He still held his wand in his right hand, and now he felt blindly along the wall with his left, his mouth clamped shut, his eyes threatening to be permanently sealed.

At length, he felt the wind lessen, and he finally dared to open his eyes a crack. He found himself at the entrance to the Slytherin common room. The air was still. He looked nervously at his sister. She gazed back impassively.

"What now?" he finally asked.

She nodded at the wall, which, when Harry lived here, would slide open any time you said the blood-laden password. Was that what he needed to do? Come up with a password? He looked searchingly at her.

"What do you choose?" she asked.

"What do I choose?" he said, incredulous. "I only have one thing left, don't I?"

She did not seem to have heard him. "I cannot enter; it is not my realm. This is where I leave you. Good bye, Harry Potter."

He remembered the words of the centaur in his first year, but unlike Firenze, she did not tell him that he was now safe. If anything, he felt like he was the least safe he had been since he'd begun going through the seven gates.

He did not think he had blinked, but suddenly she disappeared completely and utterly. No house-elf *pops* or *cracks*. No nothing. He turned to the gate. He moved his left hand over the wall; it seemed to be completely solid and unyielding. He looked down. *When you were born, how many articles of clothing were you wearing?*

He sighed; he knew what he had to do. Even as he was dreading the onslaught of some new and even more horrible torture designed to make him sorry he was doing this, he removed his last article of clothing and stood before the gate, as naked as the day he was born.

The wall silently opened.

He stepped inside, his left hand providing him with a modicum of coverage, his right arm extended, his wand ready. But here was where the similarity to Hogwarts castle ended. He was not in the Slytherin common room. He was in a cavernous space like a cathedral, with tall columns that flared like lotuses at the top, and an oblique light filtering in from some very high, unseen source. *It was the temple in his dreams.* Turquoise and black and white and red tiles swirled in complicated patterns on the floor; a large throne elaborately carved from an unidentifiable type of stone sat in the middle of the space. And on one of the columns near the throne—

Harry gasped. It was Draco Malfoy, also without a stitch of clothing, looking like his body was hanging from a *hook*. He still appeared to be dead.

Suddenly the throne was no longer empty. A woman appeared out of nowhere, with no noise to announce her. Harry held his hand over his genitals very carefully.

It was his mother.

Her long red hair looked as he remembered it, her unlined face and sparkling green eyes, her smooth skin and wide smile. He swallowed and lifted his face to her.

"Hello, Harry," she said calmly, in his mother's voice.

"Mum?" he whispered after a half-minute's silence.

"Of course not. I am Ereshkigal, queen of this realm. But you associate your mother with death, so this is how I appear to you."

"I-I associate my mother with death?"

"You must. More than any other single person. Or else I would not appear to be her. It is your mind which is seeing me like this. I cannot even see myself as you see me; I cannot see through your eyes."

Harry grimaced. "Well, right now I can't see awfully well, either. I gave up my glasses."

"You do not need to see with your physical eyes here. You need to see with your Inner Eye."

He didn't stop grimacing. "You sound like Trelawney."

"I know who you mean. You do not seem to understand the difference between a person who sees imperfectly but who knows how they *ought* to see, and a person who sees perfectly, but does not *know* that it is right."

"What?"

She smiled indulgently; it was unnerving, because the only time his mother ever smiled at him like this was just before he had killed her. "Why are you here, Harry?"

He took a breath; what would be required of him? What price would he have to pay to save Draco Malfoy?

"I'm here to save my friend."

She looked stern. "I do no favors here; and I do not parley nor deal with those who do not speak true."

"How did I not speak true? That's why I'm here." Harry was starting to get frustrated; he was also feeling at a distinct disadvantage, in that it felt to him like he was standing completely naked in front of his mother, with no coverage but his hands and his wand.

"You called him your friend."

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "Well, it's true in a way. It's partially true. He's—many things. That's one of them."

"He is also your enemy."

Harry nodded, acknowledging the truth of this. "Yes, he's that too, sometimes."

She returned to her throne and sat languidly, like a cat, with one leg tucked under her. "So. How very extraordinary. You came here to save your *enemy*."

"Is that permitted?"

She shrugged. "As long as you are truthful about it and you are willing to pay the price, anything is permitted. I just find it extraordinary. Very few living people, like you, have ever come here to ask for someone's life to be restored. But of the people who have asked, it was always a dead child or parent, a lover or dearest friend. You are the first to ask for the life of an *enemy* to be restored."

"As I said, he's many things. He's—he's a hero."

She nodded sagely. "I know. He took another person's death for her; the woman you love."

"Yes."

"He also loved her; that was why he was willing to die."

"Yes," he said again.

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength; loving someone deeply gives you courage. A man from China said that. Lao-Tzu. He lived long after the people who placed me here in this realm..."

Harry shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"I know."

Silence.

"And what do you plan to give me in exchange for this friend, this enemy, this hero who loves the same woman you do and was willing to die for her?"

Harry swallowed; he had thought about it when he was performing the spell, but with every gate he passed through, he was growing less and less sure. And now he wondered—what would the *real* cost be? What strange new world would he be unleashing by doing this?

"Um, first I have a question."

"Yes?"

"If I do whatever it takes to restore his life, will that also bring back Voldemort?"

"I did not say that you could restore two lives. Only one. Perhaps. That still remains to be seen."

"No, I mean will it bring him back because Draco's sacrifice wouldn't have taken place? I don't want to do that again..."

"Why do you think his sacrifice wouldn't have taken place if you restore his life?"

Harry was confused. "Well, erm—because," he said lamely. He started to feel hopeful. "You mean it won't?"

"If you wish to know whether success will mean changing time, no it will not. Nothing that has happened in the past will have happened any differently. So, I ask again: what do you have to offer me?"

He still felt perplexed about this, even as he felt enormous relief flood through him. *No changing time*, he thought. *Good*. He looked at Draco, his throat tight. Knowing that Voldemort would remain

dead and gone, he had no more obstacles before him, nothing to deter him. He *had* to do this. It was only right. It should have been *him*. He was the one who should have died. Voldemort had been after him for years and years; he knew what he had to do. He tried to forget Sandy's words just before he cast the spell. That was never to be....

But he had no sooner opened his mouth than she was pacing back and forth before the throne, her brow furrowed, her arms folded against her chest as she walked.

"Let me tell you a story, Harry," she said, as though she hadn't just been waiting almost ten minutes for an answer to her question.

"Once upon a time, a little girl found out that she was to become a big sister. Her mother gave birth to a little brother, but he was sickly and died. The baby died, in fact, when the little girl was holding him, rocking him to sleep. He had been sick, and finally could hold on to life no more. As she sat there cradling the baby in her arms, she said, 'It should have been me. Why wasn't it me? Oh, Death, please take me instead!'

"But Death did not take her; Death had taken the babe and gone.

"And when the girl became a woman, she married and she and her husband had children. The first time, they had twins, both girls. But one of them was smaller than the other and had had the umbilicus wrapped around her throat during the delivery; she died soon after, and the other girl, her twin, lived her life always feeling that a part of her was missing, because her sister had only lived for a few minutes and now dwelt in the Realm of the Dead. And whenever her mother saw how she mourned for her dead twin, the mother thought, 'Why wasn't it me? Oh, Death, I wish you had taken me instead!' She said this even though it would have meant her twin daughters growing up without a mother.

"But, of course, Death did not take her when she said this. Death had taken the other twin and was long gone...

"And when her daughter grew up and became a woman and married and had a child, she was overjoyed to be a grandmother. She played with her little granddaughter and held her tightly and read to her and let her know how much she was loved.

"And when her dear heart, her little granddaughter, became very ill and was dying, her grandmother held her as the life slipped out of her. Then, holding the cold corpse of her granddaughter, she said, 'It should have been me! Why wasn't it me? O, Death! Take me instead and return her to this world!'

"But Death did not do this."

She stopped her pacing and gazed expectantly at Harry. "Can you tell me why?"

Harry furrowed his brow. He thought for a while, then said, "Well, I reckon that's just not how it works. You can't just watch someone die and then say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm willing to go, so take me instead.'"

She nodded. "That is true. But *why* is it true?"

Harry stared at her. Good question. Why *was* it true? He wracked his brain, but could think of nothing.

"Jamie—my sister—I mean, Tiamat—she said it was possible to save Draco. Are you saying now that it's not?"

"Of course not. What else have you been told, about the others who have tried to do this?"

"Well, just that they weren't willing to do what was necessary."

She nodded. *Willing*. There it was again.

Tempus Bonae Voluntatis.

"But if a person is willing give up their life for someone else—"

"Then it is no sacrifice to them. How much of a sacrifice is it, for an old woman to say, 'Take me instead of this child?' How much of a sacrifice is it for someone suffering from grief and guilt to say the same? Do they feel they have a good life? Not at the moment. Do they feel it would be a sacrifice to give up that life to save the one they love? Not at all."

"So," Harry said slowly, comprehension starting to dawn on him. "I have to give up something that I really don't want to give up?"

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'sacrifice?'"

He swallowed, shaking his head.

"It means, 'to make holy, to sanctify.' In practice, it means to cut away something. The pain is merely implied, but it is a necessary aspect of the sacrifice. Humans have watered down their sacrifices after so many thousands of years. Now a 'sacrifice' is giving away one percent of their income, or putting some coins in the hat of a street performer. A sacrifice is supposed to *hurt*."

Harry frowned. "The fact that I'm here—does that mean that humans should have gone on

worshipping you and Tiamat and Apsu, the ancient Sumerian gods? That they should have gone on sacrificing animals to you? Or did you require human sacrifice?"

She smiled indulgently, as though he were an amusing but ignorant five-year-old. "What is the purpose of religion, Harry?"

He was startled; he'd never really thought much about it. "Well, I suppose to teach humans how to live. Rules for right and wrong. How to treat each other."

She shrugged. "It has been useful for those things. But many people who believe in no deity have the ability to make these rules for themselves. They see no need to attribute such rules to a divine source. There are many, many human laws that serve this purpose as well, laws that have no connection to a faith. Religion does serve that purpose; but if it were to disappear, human society would not break down into anarchy. There would still be the law."

"Well—many religions have creation stories—"

She nodded. "Yes. And they can be very revealing. But now humans also have more concrete scientific information about where they come from and how the world began. You said *Enuma Elish* when you cast your spell; do you know what that means?"

He nodded. "It means, 'In the beginning.' It's the beginning of a great creation epic."

"And why was it so familiar to the people?"

He thought back to something Ruth had told him when she'd been explaining the theory behind the spell. "Well—it was read every year during the New Year's celebration."

"What purpose does that serve?"

Harry frowned; what purpose *did* that serve? "Well, I guess it was a ritual. Everyone knew to expect it every year..."

"It reminded them of who they were." She spoke more softly now. "Every human culture is so tenuous, Harry. You have no idea. The recitation of a creation story may seem to have something to do with religion, but a ritual like this is a *binding*, a way to remind everyone in the culture who they are and where they belong. Can you think of any similar things that don't have to do with religion?"

"Well—when I was young, before I went to Hogwarts, there was Bonfire Day."

She smiled. "Yes. The primordial draw of fire. The patriotic feeling of hanging a traitor in effigy. Patriotism, too, is a kind of religion, you know."

He'd thought of something else. "Hermione told me something—in my other life. She used to live in Philadelphia, in America. Every year on the Fourth of July, someone would read the Declaration of Independence aloud at this place—um—Independence Hall. That's it. She said she'd never heard Americans be so quiet as when that was being read, and never so noisy as when they were cheering afterward..."

She smiled. "Different country, same phenomenon. You understand, I think."

"But," he said, "with religion, there's also usually something about what happens to you after you die." He looked around, keeping his hand covering himself carefully. "I guess they're all a bit off about that."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've heard about things like tunnels of light, and St. Peter standing at a gate with a checklist, and people who've died briefly and been brought back talking about actually feeling fire, heat, as though they'd been in hell briefly. This isn't like any of those things."

"But you did not invoke a god associated with a belief system that includes an afterworld like that."

"What?"

"You invoked this afterworld with your spell. You see, Harry, the reason why there are so very many types of religion in the world is that there are so many different types of people. Almost everyone has a religious impulse of some sort, and there is a religion for just about everyone. When humans die, they see exactly what they expect to see. If a person expects to see St. Peter with a clipboard or a computer, standing beside twelve-foot high golden gates on a white fluffy cloud, that is exactly what they will see. If they expect to be in a sunlit field with blooming wildflowers, that is what they will see."

"*What?*" he said again.

"This is all in your mind, Harry. Humans are highly suggestible. Of course, it has been drawn to your attention that you are unusually suggestible even among wizards, who have this quality in greater quantity than non-magical people, or they would not be able to execute their spells. I meant what I said; everyone who dies sees exactly what they expect to see. They encounter the god in which they believe, if they believe in a god, and if they don't, and expect to disappear utterly into oblivion, that is what happens to them. If they believe in reincarnation, they will begin a new life."

If they expect to become a starfish, they will. But they have to *truly* believe it. If a person goes through the motions of adhering to a religion all his life, but that person does not truly believe that anything will happen after death other than oblivion, then he will die and immediately disappear into oblivion. However much time that person may have spent going to his church or temple or mosque, because he did not truly believe, he did not *really* expect to see the afterworld taught by his religion.

"Human consciousness does not disappear when the heart stops and there is no longer oxygen going to the brain. It simply moves on to a different realm...."

"*The next great adventure...*" Harry murmured. She didn't seem to notice.

"There *are* those who are restless and rebellious, who insist that they have business to finish—those people become ghosts. But most humans are actually quite good at letting go of the world; better than they think they will be before they die."

"But then—why do some people who die and are revived say they were suffering in hell? Wouldn't you want to imagine yourself in heaven?"

"Ah, but once humans die, their self-perception is no longer clouded. Here and there, a very rare person sees himself as he really is during his life, but most people cannot see themselves clearly until after death. Then they know themselves completely and utterly. They are no longer capable of deluding themselves. If someone adheres to a belief system that includes specific types of afterlife punishments for certain types of actions during life, then, when they die and see themselves for what they are, if they did those things, they will expect to be punished for those deeds. I said that humans who die see exactly what they *expect* to see. I did not say that they see what they *want* to see. That is different."

"And sometimes what we want is the thing that is absolutely the worst thing for us...." he said softly, remembering what Dumbledore had said about the Mirror of Erised.

"That is true."

He frowned in thought. *I wonder what Draco is seeing right now? I wonder what he expected to see after his death?*

"So, from what you said, I can't just say, 'Take me instead of him.' It's not a sacrifice to me, then; it's not good enough."

"What do you think?" She looked at him, unblinking.

"I think I'm right. But that still leaves the question of *what* exactly is necessary? Will you tell me, and I'll decide whether to give it up? Or do I have to work it out myself?"

"Why don't you try to work it out first?"

He sighed; it wasn't easy to think clearly without his glasses. When the whole world looked so fuzzy to him, he felt like his thinking was fuzzy, too. He thought for a while; she waited patiently. He held his right hand with his wand in front of his groin now and moved his left hand up to his basilisk pendent and held it; a calmness flowed through him, as it always did when he touched it. It occurred to him suddenly that he could have given this up and kept his glasses; but suddenly, he was glad he had not done that. It was odd not to be able to see Ginny when he clutched it, but then, she was in a different world than he was now.

"You mentioned that you know that Draco loves Ginny too, that we both love her. Do I—do I have to give up Ginny? If he comes back, I have to let him have her?"

"Hmph! How would she feel about you talking about her that way?"

He grimaced. "She probably wouldn't be thrilled..."

She nodded. "She isn't yours to give. That would hurt, but you would hurt *her* as much as you. She loves you; this isn't meant to be *her* sacrifice. This is yours."

He wracked his brain some more; his arms were stiff from holding them in front of his groin for so long; he ached to whirl them around in a windmill, but he somehow felt that would be disrespectful to the queen of the Realm of the Dead, who also happened to look exactly like his mother. What else could he give up? He couldn't trade his life for Draco's, he couldn't give up Ginny since he didn't own her; what else could he do?

"I could see you when you were passing through the gates," she told him now. "You did well with all of them. Well, almost all of them. At one point I thought you would turn and run, change your mind..."

Harry furrowed his brow. "Are you trying to give me a clue?"

"Yes."

He thought about the gates, about giving up each thing he'd been wearing, about how the moment he did, something happened that made him very, very sorry he no longer had the item he'd sacrificed in order to move on. He had progressively made himself more and more vulnerable.

Which test had been the hardest? And how would that tell him what his sacrifice should be?

The minutes ticked by; and yet, he wasn't completely certain that time ever really passed in this place. It was utterly still. The light didn't seem to come from any source, such as candles, which would eventually burn down, nor lamps, which would eventually run out of oil. There weren't even any magical candles that would never drip wax or burn down....

Suddenly, he opened his eyes very wide. He knew what the sacrifice should be. His heart felt like it would break. *No, he thought, not that, anything but that....*

He fell to his knees, forgetting to cover himself; then he curled in a ball on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest. How could he give that up? How could he go on? But then he looked through his tears at the body of Draco Malfoy, hanging on the column near the throne. He thought of Draco's face when he had thrown himself in front of Ginny, when he had taken the brunt of the curse that was meant for her. He did that, even though he knew Ginny loved Harry, even though his love for her was not returned...He had never meant for her to be dragged to Godric's Hollow with Ron. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen....

And even though this young man had nearly caused him, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione to be killed, it was also because of his love for Ginny that Voldemort was no more; Harry could see with perfect clarity the green light speeding its way toward Ginny, Draco's body at her feet; he could see the light rebounding from what seemed to be a kind of invisible shield around her body, traveling back to the tall, thin wizard, back into his wand, the impact draining the life out of him, leaving him an empty shell.

Harry sat up, wiping the tears away from his eyes. He knew what he had to do, and that it was the right thing to do. His sacrifice would be nothing compared to Draco's. How could he not do this? How could he begrudge Draco this when the world was rid of Voldemort because of what he did?

He looked up at his mother's face, which was also *not* his mother's face. She looked like she knew what he was thinking.

"You know what I'm thinking, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Am I right? Is this what will do it, what will bring him back?"

"Do you think it is enough?"

"I'd-I'd rather die than—" But he didn't finish. That spoken thought had said it all. It was the last thing in the world he could imagine living without. And therefore, it was the only acceptable sacrifice.

She nodded, and held out her hand.

* * * * *

There was a rushing sound in his ears, as if he were caught in a wind tunnel. He was made of wind, he was nothing but rushing air. The sound grew louder and louder, until it almost had a *whistling* tone to it, it was resonating with his body and with the world. It felt like everything in the world was vibrating at exactly the same speed, completely in sync, and the wind rushed on and on and on and on....

Then suddenly, everything was still.

He was aware of being on a grassy surface. The wind was moving his hair and he was lying on his side. Someone was up against him. Warmth emanated from the other body. He reached out and touched the other person, feeling smooth skin, a nose, a mouth, eyes....

"Ow! Get your finger out of my eye, Potter!"

Harry jerked his hand back. He was starting to hear other sounds; cries and moans, people in pain, people shocked and frightened. Harry shook his head, still feeling like his thinking was a bit fuzzy. Had that been Malfoy's voice? It certainly sounded like it. Harry tried opening his eyes as wide as he could, then closing them again, squeezing them tightly shut. Then he opened them once more. Nothing but blackness. Why was it so dark? How long had he been in the Realm of the Dead? It must be the middle of the night.

Then he heard pounding feet and felt the ground under him shake as they drew nearer.

"Harry! Harry, you're all right!" That was Ron.

"Harry! What happened?" Always wanting to know things; that was Hermione. Despite Ron's longer legs, she reached him first, sinking onto the ground and throwing her arms around him. He clutched at her, his fingers in her short curls, he felt wetness on her soft cheek next to his. *She was all right*, he thought. *She and Ron were all right.*

And then his other best friend pulled him forward in a bear hug, slapping his back. He was

suddenly aware that he had his clothes on again. “Harry, we were certain that—well that you were just *gone*....”

Then the voice he’d really been waiting for.

“*Harry!*”

“*Ginny!*” he cried, his head whipping around in the direction of her voice. He staggered to his feet, and then she was in his arms, her warm body pressed against his, his mouth on hers for only a moment before he buried his face in her hair, unable to contain his relief and happiness that she was all right.

He felt Ginny pull away from him a little and take his hands in hers. “I never thought I’d see you again! And—”

He wasn’t sure why she’d stopped; then he heard her gasp and he heard the impact of two bodies nearby as she cried out, “*Draco!* You’re alive!”

Harry heard Draco Malfoy’s strangled voice saying, “Not for long, if you keep that up, Ginny.” He heard them disconnect and she put her arms around Harry again.

“You—you brought him back! How—how on earth did you do it?”

Then he frowned, realizing that something was wrong. “It’s so dark. I can’t see any of you. How can you see me? How could you see Malfoy?” He clutched his wand tightly; somehow the blackness around him seemed so impenetrable he wasn’t convinced that lighting his wand would do any good at all.

There was an awkward pause. Then he heard Hermione say, “What do you mean, dark? It’s broad daylight, Harry. You and Malfoy were gone for quite a while, yes. For hours and hours. But it won’t be dark for ages yet. You can’t see a thing?”

He shook his head. “Not a speck of light.” His voice quivered.

He was blind.

The quote at the beginning of the chapter is from page 304 of *House* by Tracy Kidder.

Thanks to Dan, Emily, Nick and Rena for the beta reading, and to everyone who commented on Chapter 28.